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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses curriculum and teaching strategies for early childhood education which best serve children's long-term development. Two dimensions of development, normative and dynamic, are considered with respect to what children should be learning. Four categories of learning are identified, namely, knowledge, skills, feelings, and dispositions. Presented is the view that young children learn most effectively when engaged in interaction with others in the classroom, with materials, and with their surroundings. The risks of early academic instruction are examined, and the importance of using a variety of teaching methods in an informal setting is stressed. Suggested is an intellectually oriented approach in which children interact in small groups as they work together on projects which help them make sense of their own experience. (PCB)

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ERIC Digest

What Should Young Children Be Learning?

Lilian G. Katz

Recent research on intellectual and social development and learning is rich in implications for curriculum and teaching strategies for early childhood education. Unfortunately, educational practices tend to lag behind what is known about teaching and learning. This digest discusses curriculum and the methods of teaching which best serve children's long-term development.

The Nature of Development

The concept of development includes two dimensions: the normative dimension, concerning the capabilities and limitations of most children at a given age, and the dynamic dimension, concerning the sequence and changes that occur in all aspects of the child's functioning as he grows. It also addresses the cumulative effects of experience. While the normative dimension indicates what children can and cannot do at a given age, the dynamic dimension raises questions about what children should or should not do at a particular time in their development in light of possible long-term consequences.

In many preschool programs and kindergartens, young children are engaged in filling out worksheets, reading from flash cards or reciting numbers in rote fashion. But just because young children can do those things, in a normative sense, is not sufficient justification for requiring them to do so. Young children usually do willingly most things adults ask of them. But their willingness is not a reliable indicator of the value of an activity. The developmental question is not, What can children do? Rather it is, What should children do that best serves their development and learning in the long term?

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Learning Through Interaction

Contemporary research confirms the view that young children learn most effectively when they are engaged in interaction rather than in merely receptive or passive activities. Young children should be interacting with adults, materials and their surroundings in ways which help them make sense of their own experience and environment. They should be investigating and observing aspects of their environment worth learning about, and recording their findings and observations through talk, paintings and drawings. Interaction that arises in the course of such activities provides a context for much social and cognitive learning.

Four Categories of Learning

The four categories of learning outlined below are especially relevant to the education of young children:

- Knowledge. In early childhood, knowledge consists of facts, concepts, ideas, vocabulary, and stories. A child acquires knowledge from someone's answers to his questions, explanations, descriptions and accounts of events as well as through observation.
- Skills. Skills are small units of action which occur in a relatively short period of time and are easily observed or inferred. Physical, social, verbal, counting and drawing skills are among a few of the almost endless number of skills learned in the early years. Skills can be learned from direct instruction and improved with practice and drill.
- Feelings. These are subjective emotional states, many of which are innate. Among those that are learned are feelings of competence, belonging, and security. Feelings about school, teachers, learning and other children are also learned in the early years.
- Dispositions. Dispositions can be thought of as habits of mind or tendencies to respond to certain situations in certain ways. Curiosity, friendliness or unfriendliness, bossiness, and creativity are dispositions or sets of dispositions rather than skills or pieces of knowledge. There is a significant difference between having writing skills and having the disposition to be a writer.

  Dispositions are not learned through instruction or drill. The dispositions that children need to acquire or to strengthen—curiosity, creativity, cooperation, friendliness—are learned primarily from being around people who exhibit them. It is unfortunate that some dispositions, such as being curious or puzzled, are rarely displayed by adults in front of children.

  A child who is to learn a particular disposition must have the opportunity to behave in a manner that is in keeping with the disposition.

When that occurs, the child's behavior can be responded to, and thus strengthened. Teachers can strengthen certain dispositions by setting learning goals rather than performance goals. A teacher who says, "I want to see how much you can find out about something," rather than, "I want to see how well you can do," encourages children to focus on what they are learning rather than on their performance, and how others will judge their performance.

Risks of Early Academic Instruction

Research on the long-term effects of various curriculum models suggests that the introduction of academic work into the early childhood curriculum yields good results on standardized tests in the short term, but may be counterproductive in the long term. For example, the risk of early instruction in beginning reading skills is that the amount of drill and practice required for success at an early age will undermine children's dispositions to be readers. It is clearly not useful for a child to learn skills if, in the process of acquiring them, the disposition to use them is lost. On the other hand, obtaining the disposition without the requisite skills is not desirable either. Results from longitudinal studies suggest that curricula and teaching methods should be designed to optimize the acquisition of knowledge, skills, desirable dispositions and feelings.

Another risk of introducing young children to academic work prematurely is that those who cannot relate to the tasks required are likely to feel incompetent. Students who repeatedly experience difficulties may come to consider themselves stupid and may bring their behavior into line accordingly.

Variety of Teaching Methods

Academically focused curricula for preschool programs typically adopt a single pedagogical method dominated by workbooks, drill and practice. It is reasonable to assume that when a single teaching method is used for a diverse group of children, a significant proportion of these children are likely to fail. The younger the children are, the greater the variety of teaching methods there should be, since the younger the group is, the less likely the children are to have been socialized into a standard way of responding to their environment, and the more likely it is that the children's readiness to learn is influenced by background experiences which are idiosyncratic and unique.

For practical reasons there are limits to how varied teaching methods can be. It should be noted, however, that while approaches dominated by workbooks often claim to individualize instruction, they really individualize nothing more than the day on which a child completes a routine task. Such programs can weaken the disposition to learn.

As for the learning environment, the younger the children are, the more informal it should be. Informal learning environments encourage spontaneous play and cooperative effort. In spontaneous play, children engage in whatever play activities interest them. Cooperative effort occurs when children engage in such activities as group projects, investigations, and constructions.

Conclusion

Spontaneous play is not the only alternative to early academic instruction. The data on children's learning suggests that preschool and kindergarten experiences require an intellectually oriented approach in which children interact in small groups as they work together on projects which help them make sense of their own experience. These projects should also strengthen their dispositions to observe, experiment, inquire, and examine more closely the worthwhile aspects of their environment.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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